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BORDER DISPUTES

Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans by Alan Riding

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Some of the Central Intelligence Agency's station chiefs in Latin America used to joke during President Reagan's first term about "looking for the avatollah." There was a gung-ho attitude in the agency, led by its director and abetted by then-national intelligence officer Constantine Menges. There was pressure to report that Mexico was on its way to becoming "an Iran-next-door," and even though there was nothing substantial to support this contention, agents and analysts had the choice of proving a negative or—worst of stigmas—appearing naive.

The weight of unreality grew so heavy that last year Menges's successor, veteran intelligence officer John Horton, resigned in protest rather than adapt the National Intelligence Estimate on Mexico to what he considered alarmist standards. The estimate was supposed to be the last, best word on what was going on south of the border; and Horton, it seems, did not think the avatollah had a role in it.

Fortunately, the public does not have to rely on the CIA for its information. It now has at hand an estimate as intelligent as anyone is likely to find on the condition of Mexico today. Alan Riding's best-selling book is an elegant, comprehensive essay on that nation very much as it is, not as one might want it—or fear it.

Mexico, so close and yet so foreign, has always provided fertile ground for the ambitions and the anxieties of American politicians, whether the Alamo is under attack, the Zimmerman telegram is on the wire, or illegal aliens are massed for a silent invasion across the border. It is easy to conjure the spectral menace of a crazed and hostile world that begins just south of Brownsville. Most people in the United States (and many Mexicans) are befuddled by the labyrinths of Mexican society and government. And the problems created by Mexico's mix of oil riches, corruption, poverty, population, and frequently repressive politics, and by the proximity of regional turmoil, are real enough. (Consider the recent case of U.S. drug enforcement agent Enrique Camarena, murdered, it seems, by Mexican police officials; they were themselves deeply involved in narcotics trafficking, and their confessions were apparently beaten out of them by their erstwhile colleagues. What better image of ruthlessness, lawlessness, and corruption?)

Still, as Riding makes abundantly clear, the danger of confused alarms about the future of Mexico is that finally they lead nowhere, except toward ignorant meddling by the United States that can turn real problems into real disasters. Riding has an especially sophisticated understanding of this dangerous dynamic. He spent 13 years in Mexico, most of the time as the correspondent for *The New York Times*. Apart from his perfect Spanish, he had a remarkable level of cultural fluency. He was comfortable with many of the most influential figures in the Mexican government, and generally they appear to have been comfortable with him. Riding's access and understanding allow him to examine Mexico's weaknesses in detail, and also to make the system's contradictions comprehensible and to appreciate its strengths.

THE essential accomplishment of modern Mexico has been to maintain stability, wringing a functional peace from the bloody tumult of its past. Neither a democracy in conventional terms nor a dictatorship, Mexico's political system under the all-powerful PRI, or Institutionalized Revolutionary Party, bears less resemblance to the ayatollah's Iran than to Mario Puzo's Mafia. It is not the product of fanaticism, but of cold-blooded pragmatism. Its ideology is survival, and it has been flexible enough to bend with shifting domestic and international political currents. Traditionally it is ruthless, but traditionally it also delivers what its people want.

"Almost instinctively," Riding reports, the PRI "co-opts emergent opposition leaders, either giving them influential jobs in government or neutralizing them with money . . . Opposition groups that stray outside this context are more vulnerable to direct repression." Riding mentions massacres of leftist students in 1968 and 1971, and the subsequent disappearances of other dissidents. "But the government also considers resort to such tactics a poor reflection on its bargaining talents: it should be the fear—and not the fact—of unrest and repression that makes negotiations possible." What the PRI normally does with its opponents, in other words, is make them offers they can't refuse.

Mexico's notorious corruption becomes "a practical way of bridging the gap between idealistic legislation and the management of day-to-day living," and the concept of corruption "often becomes indistinguishable from that of influence, which flourishes among the family and friends of leading politicians and blends naturally into the old tradition of favor and patronage. . . . Today, corruption enables the system to function, providing the 'oil' that makes the wheels of the bureaucratic machine turn and the 'glue' that seals political alliances." From such contradictions comes a synthesis that seems to work, decade after decade, however strange or unseemly it may be in North American eyes. And if Mexico's regime did not presume to look outside its borders, one presumes the Reagan administration would be content with it. It is authoritarian; it is stable; it is basically, if not slavishly, pro-American on most issues.

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